Unitarian Horizons

April 15, 1938

A MODERN PARABLE

WHEN Marconi was working with his first instruments for the transmission of telegraphic messages without wires, he devoted years of research to the effort to correct what was then considered the principal defect of his invention — namely, that the waves sent out by his apparatus could be picked up by people other than those for whom they were intended. He failed in his endeavor. The defect remained.

And then, thirty years later, what we know as radio appeared. Today there are perhaps forty million listeners, in every corner of the globe, to whom radio is almost so commonplace that it is taken completely for granted. But radio is in essence little more than the utilization of the "defect" in Marconi's pioneer invention. It is based upon the fact that electric waves can be picked up anywhere. What looked like an unsurmountable obstacle in the way of Marconi's earlier dream became the essential element in a far greater achievement a generation later.

ITS PERSONAL APPLICATION

HERE, it seems to me, is a suggestive and instructive modern parable, with a good many different applications in the wider areas of our thinking about social and religious problems. What seem at first to be major defects and obstacles may, with the passage of time, turn out to be the essential conditions for progress of a kind we hadn't even imagined before. Limitations upon the full use of our powers today may tomorrow be revealed as the necessary instrumentalities for the development of new powers. As the horizons of our thinking widen, we may come to the discovery that the stone which the builders yesterday rejected is just what is needed for the

headstone of the corner in a nobler temple for the future. It is seldom safe to be dogmatic in our condemnations. Fate has a curious way of reversing judgments that are too confidently handed down.

The application of the parable to personal living needs little exposition. If you study the lives of men and women who have achieved what the world calls greatness, you will almost always find that they have had to struggle against all sorts of difficulties and have somehow learned how to transmute them into sources of greater power. What narrows the bed of the stream will also deepen and strengthen the current; and this is just as true of the humble souls who achieve the kind of greatness which the world never bothers to notice. The one thing most of us would do anything to spare our children is a life without difficulties, for until a person has begun to learn how to turn real troubles and difficulties into glorious gain he hasn't even entered the primary school of life.

ITS SOCIAL APPLICATION

BUT it isn't so easy to see the application of the parable to our social life. Everyone can recite a weary catalog of evils that abound in our modern social order, from the slums of our vast cities to the degenerate back-regions of the

countryside. It isn't merely the so-called radicals that know the list of such evils and proclaim them on every occasion. I think the severest and most vocal of the critics of contemporary society are apt to be the conservatives and reactionaries. But most such critics, of whatever party or stripe, are content to fulminate against the evils they decry. At most, they offer some drastic — and usually quite impracticable — suggestion for a complete change in the whole machinery of civilized society. What they almost never do is to ask themselves whether these obvious defects might not be so used as to make them the means of genuine progress. Like Marconi, they spend vast amounts of energy trying to overcome defects that could be utilized to achieve some far more significant end.

CREATIVE IMAGINATION

THE plain fact is, I suppose, that most of us very seldom make creative use of what may well be our most important gift — imagination. We have it — or at least we did have it when we were young — but we don't use it. It still remains in our possession, but it has become atrophied. It is "lodged with us useless."

I can think of no service which one person might render to another that would be more valu-

able than to find a way to stir into life the imagination that has been allowed to fall into disuse. That is as near to miracle as we ever get in this world, and sometimes it actually happens. When it does, the whole aspect of life is suddenly transformed. It is what Masefield meant when he spoke of "the glory of the lighted mind." And the secret of it is freedom. Our creative imagination is enslaved. Somehow it must be set at liberty.

FREEDOM OF THOUGHT

WHAT is wanted is genuine freedom of thought, which I imagine is one of the rarest things in the world. It is rare for various reasons, chief of which is the fact that it is wholly inconsistent with personal comfort. "God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take what you please, — you can never have both. . . . He in whom the love of repose predominates will accept the first creed, the first philosophy, the first political party he meets, — most likely his father's. He gets rest, commodity and reputation; but he shuts the door of truth. He in whom the love of truth predominates will keep himself aloof from all moorings, and afloat. He will abstain from dogmatism, and recognize all the opposite negations between which, as walls, his being is swung. He submits to the inconven-

ience of suspense and imperfect opinion, but he is a candidate for truth, as the other is not, and respects the highest law of his being."

When Emerson sets the love of repose over against the love of truth, he recognizes the kind of eternal opposition which exists likewise between the love of repose and anything that deserves to be called freedom of thought. You cannot ever have both. If you want the comfort of security, you must forego freedom. If you insist upon a roof over your head, you will thereby shut out the stars. To think freely, your mind must be free to range abroad without setting up any barriers anywhere; and that sort of thinking is not conducive to the ease and comfort of a home-loving soul; yet only such free thinking will see and recognize the new meanings of life. Such freedom is no merely negative thing. It doesn't consist in the absence of fetters. It is a great and positive force that creates as it explores, and builds as it moves onward. The results of such thinking are always more rather than less. The new ideas and convictions to which it leads are always larger and more inclusive than those from which it starts.

MORE STATELY MANSIONS

THIS is most surely the case when genuinely free thought turns to the great problems and speculations of religion. The creeds which have come down from the past may be set

aside, but what takes their place is always something of wider and deeper dimensions. It is only the low-vaulted past that is left behind, and the new temple is nobler than the last. The process means gain rather than loss for any mind that is free from the restricting slavery to present ideas.

Supremely, this seems to me true in that area of religious thinking which we call the thought of immortality. The empty tomb, which is the great Easter symbol, represents much more than merely the simple faith of the first disciples, to whom it signified the sudden emergence of a deathless faith in the ultimate victory of the soul of Jesus Christ, out of the bleak darkness of utter despair. It is the symbol of man's constantly growing thought of the true worth and destiny of his own spirit.

IMPERFECT OPINION

STAGE by stage, from the crudest barbarism to the most exalted concept of a Plato or a Martineau, the mind of man has moved forward, in its quest of an idea that shall satisfy the deep longing of his heart for an adequate faith. With each onward step, something that once was precious has been outgrown and something more truly and deeply precious has been achieved. Always the opinions of the moment have been

imperfect, and free minds have had the courage to hold them on this understanding, thus continuing to be candidates for the truth which the future will disclose. The full meaning of Easter is its affirmation that tomorrow will transcend today, that the long succession of temples built by human minds and hearts will continue to grow vaster and more noble forever. Only free and courageous souls can move onward without clinging to the past, and the true purpose of Easter is to create such freedom and courage in our lives.

F. M. E.

Volume I UNITARIAN HORIZONS Number 8

Published by The Beacon Press, Inc. on the fifteenth day of each month from September to June inclusive.

AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION
25 Beacon Street, Boston, Mass.

FREDERICK M. ELIOT, *President* PARKER E. MAREAN, *Treasurer*

Printed in the U. S. A.